DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 638 EC 170 416

AUTHOR Brion-Meisels, Steven; And Others
TITLE Student Decision Making: Improving the School for All Students.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Minnesota Conference on Programming for the Developmental Needs of Adolescents with Behavioral Disorders (Minneapolis, MN, Fall, 1982). Contained in EC 170 401.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Behavior Problems; *Curriculum Development; *Decision Making; *Interpersonal Competence; Intervention; Models; Program Development; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the role of decision making to develop social skills in adolescents with learning or behavior problems and describes a project to implement such a decision making model. The paper begins by tracing some of the crucial issues of adolescence and then describes the Adolescent Issues Project which has produced a curriculum focusing on decisions about drug use. work, adolescent development and sexuality, juvenile law, and government. Core skills in the decision making process (including social perspective-taking and alternative thinking) are reviewed, and applications are described such as use of a decision making approach to the classroom, counseling and discipline, student governance, parent involvement, and student assessment. Evaluation data point to indications of success. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Student Decision Making: Improving the School for All Students

Steven Brion-Meisels, Elisabeth Rendeiro, and Gwen Lowenheim

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
CCBD
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED248638

Recent emphasis on returning special needs students to mainstream settings focuses attention once again on two important questions. First, which core social skills do we seek to teach to all students, regardless of their specific special needs or special strengths? Second, what social skills do special needs students require for successful reintegration?

There is general agreement among educators, both in special and regular education settings, that all students need to learn basic language and math skills. Less agreement exists about the need for social skills education for adolescents (Feeney, 1980). This lack of agreement regarding curriculum has hampered our ability to develop strong school programs that can successfully meet the range of adolescent needs (Cooper, 1983; Feeney, 1980). The disagreement derives in part from the lack of a conceptual framework that can integrate social skill development throughout the school in curriculum, counseling, and behavior management.

For the past several years, we have worked with adolescents, parents, and educators to develop school-based programs designed to help improve social skills that can facilitate a return to public school and community settings. Our experience suggests first, that it is useful to think of decision making as a core skill which *all* students need to learn; second, that a focus on the developmental tasks of adolescence can provide a unifying theme for intervention; and third, that a focus on decision making as a core component of school practice is one way to help special needs students succeed in the mainstream. Our belief in the utility of a decision-making approach rests on a reading of relevant literature and on obsevations of adolescents in schools. We propose seven hypotheses about adolescents in school to guide our work:

1. All adolescents, regardless of their specific needs and skills, must deal with a common, core set of changes in their social relationships with parents, teachers, friends, and other peers (Jones, 1980).

2. The transitions of adolescence create a common set of issues which can be constructively integrated into the school program, and which must be confronted by school staff who seek to aid the development of adolescents (Cooper, 1983; Feeney, 1980).

3. The changes in relationships that characterize adolescence require that students make decisions and develop strategies for dealing with new problems; for example, conflicts with parents, peer pressure to use and abuse drugs, making and keeping stable friendships (Jones, 1980).

EC 170416

4. Successful decision making is facilitated by a core set of social skills which are identifiable and accessible to most adolescents: these include social perspective-taking, thinking about consequences and alternatives to social behaviors, and communication skills (Selman, 1980; Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976).

5. All schools need to improve the ways in which they integrate students who have special needs; a concentration on decision-making skills for all students can improve reintegration and benefit the whole school community.

6. Whole-school approaches to decision making can help a wide range of students to improve their social skills and interact responsibly with each other as members of a community (First & Mizell, 1980; Fox, 1973).

7. A focus on decision making is an effective *preventive* strategy for improving school programs and the school climate.

This paper will describe a model of decision making which has been used to develop a number of school-wide approaches for improving adolescents' social skills. We begin by reviewing some of the crucial issues of adolescence. We then describe our work with the Adolescent Issues Project. The third section of the paper outlines the core decision making skills which we have used to develop school programs. The fourth section describes a range of intervention strategies which use the core skills, including classroom curricula, counseling and discipline techniques, and parent education activities. We then present evaluation data which suggest the usefulness of the model, and describe some questions for further research in this area. Finally, we suggest some general guidelines for educators who want to develop decision-making programs.

TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescents who are in special education programs may vary greatly from their peers in terms of academic performance, social skills, cognitive functioning, and motor skills. However, the vast majority of students between the ages of 12 and 16 all share a common set of experiences and face a common set of issues. Some of the issues faced by all adolescents are created by the onset of puberty. Physical and hormonal changes interact with changes in feelings and interests to create new social relationships with peers and adults. Adolescents begin to want to move away from family relationships into a more autonomous and interdependent definition of themselves in the context of new social groups. They begin to ask questions about their own competence as students, friends, and workers. They begin to question childhood values and ideas. They seek more interdependent and intimate relationships with peers, including dating and group relationships.

At the same time, they are thrust into new social contexts that are often confusing. Schools are larger; students may shift classmates and teachers with each bell. Adolescents become interested in working and making money; they confront their own skills and needs as well as the pain of a society without sufficient meaningful work opportunities for adults or adolescents.

Adolescents with learning or behavior problems must face these same issues. However, they often have not learned the social skills which facilitate the development of new social relationships. Therefore, they are often left out or kicked out; they have few friends, and their families often are under great stress themselves. Many adolescents experience a painful cycle; they lack skills for social success, and they lack the social opportunities to practice and improve social skills.

In this situation, schools must play a central role, both remedially and in preventing cycles of social failure. Yet educators often lack the time and training to develop a conceptual framework for integrating these issues into the fabric of school and classroom interactions. Therefore, the core issues of adolescence are too often ignored by the social institution which may be best equipped to help: the school. Consequently, schools for adolescents too often fail to meet the changing and unique needs of many students. Our ability to integrate the social and psychological issues of adolescence into school practice can transform the energy of adolescence, with its insistent questioning and searching for new values and experiences, into a powerfully constructive force to improve school climate for all students.

THE ADOLESCENT ISSUES PROJECT

One example of a school-based approach to the issues of adolescence has been our work at the Adolescent Issues Project. We are a group of educators and researchers who work with schools to develop decision making programs for adolescents. For the past three years, we have been funded through a Model Program grant from the U.S. Office of Education. We began in a substantially-separate special education program (the Manville School in Boston), and have expanded our work to include adolescents in a range of special and regular educational settings.

One product of our work is a series of five classroom curriculum units, ranging in length from 15 to 30 classroom hours (Brion-Meisels, Lowenheim, & Rendeiro, 1982). The five content areas of the curriculum focus on decisions about drug use, work, adolescent development and sexuality, juvenile law, and government. Each curriculum focuses on teaching a core set of social skills and strategies which are intended to improve the decision-making process, and are described in the next section of this paper. In addition, we have used this core set of social skills to help schools create and adapt programs for student government, counseling and discipline, parent involvement, and student assessment. Finally, we have explored research questions related to adolescent decisions, including the development of evaluation measures which can usefully describe changes in social skills and adaptation of developmental interview techniques to help educators improve school programs (Selman, Krupa, & Demorest, 1982).

At this point components of the program have been used in over 50 schools, with consistently positive evaluation from teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Evaluation data is provided in subsequent sections of this paper.

CORE SKILLS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

From a review of relevant literature and our own work with adolescents, a core set of thinking skills have been identified which facilitate successful decision making (Brion-Meisels & Selman, August 1982; Selman, 1980; Spivack, Platt, & Sure, 1976). The five core skills are not exhaustive; however, they provide a helpful guide for understanding and improving the skills adolescents use in making personal decisions.

Social Perspective-Taking

As adolescents expand the breadth and intensity of their relationships with adults and peers, they are expected to take the perspective of many different people — individually (as in friendship or parent relations) and in groups (as

in participation on teams, or in co-worker relations). For example, in dealing with friendship conflicts, it is important to be able to look at the conflict from the friend's point of view: to see his/her needs as well as one's own. In preparing for a job interview, it is crucial to look at oneself as a potential employer might, to evaluate appearance, skills, and motivation. The ability to take second-person and mutual perspectives is seen as a necessary though not sufficient social skill for successfully dealing with friendship and collaborative group experiences (Selman, 1980).

Alternative Thinking

The second core social skill is the ability to recognize options, choices, and alternative solutions to resolve a particular dilemma. For example, if a student feels unable to complete a classroom assignment, it is helpful to have more than one strategy to deal with this situation. The same is true of conflicts with friends, classmates, parents, employers, or co-workers; in each case, the awareness of, and ability to use, alternative strategies provides the adolescent with a flexible repertoire for solving the problem at hand (Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976).

Consequential Thinking

Many adolescents exacerbate their conflicts with peers and adults because they have not adequately anticipated the consequences of their behavior for themselves or for others involved in the situation (Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976). For example, an adolescent who impulsively quits a job after a conflict with his boss may not have thought through the consequences of this decision. If he can anticipate consequences, he may be motivated to think of alternative solutions which will adequately resolve the conflict without losing the job.

Communication Skills

Educators who work with adolescents speak painfully of how poor communication skills intensify or creat conflicts between teens and parents, teachers, and employers. For example, the adolescent who finds himself isolated from peers may have needs, ideas, and skills which he simply cannot communicate adequately; his response may be to withdraw or disrupt as a way of getting attention. The same is often true of adolescents who are school behavior problems or who drop out of school (Jones, 1980). Opportunities to practice and improve communication skills are often ignored in our quest for improving basic academic skills, especially in the individualized programs designed for special needs youth.

Evaluation Skills

Constructive self-evaluation requires each of the four skills listed above. An accurate evaluation of personal needs, skills, values, and interests is helpful as an adolescent develops stable friendships, makes informed educational and vocational decisions, and establishes young adult relationships characterized by interdependence with family, peers, and the community. Tragically, *evaluation* has often meant *failure* for many adolescents; they are measured by what they cannot do, or by the problems they create (Brion-Meisels, 1979). Social psychological research (Rosenthal, 1966) and the anecdotal reports of educators corroborate the self-fulfilling prophecy that subsequently takes

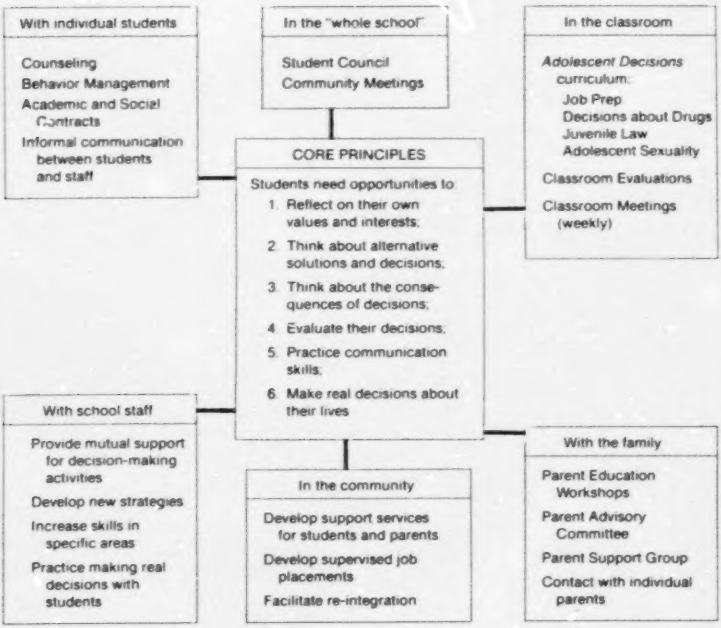
place: adolescents behave to conform to adult negative expectations (Jones, 1980). Lacking a positive social identity, they form a negative one because they have no alternative. The ability to evaluate oneself in a balanced, positive manner, taking into account needs as well as strengths and hopes as well as fears, is a crucial core skill in the decision-making process.

Decisions and Strategies

In our work, we have understood these five core skills to be crucial variables in affecting the *decisions* which adolescents made and the *strategies* they use to carry out their decisions. For example, an adolescent who has few friends, few positive relationships with teachers, and inadequate basic academic and vocational skills, may feel angry, depressed, helpless, and hopeless. He is faced with a *decision:* should i quit school or stick it out? This *decision* will be affected by his ability to take numerous perspectives on the problem, generate alternative solutions, anticipate consequences, talk with others, and accu-

TABLE 1
Decision Making as a Core Component of the School Program

Adolescent Issues Project, Manville School 1982



rately evaluate himself. Once the decision is made, he must then create strategies for dealing with the situation. For example, if he decides to stay in school, he must find new ways to get help, new school programs at which he might be successful; or he may try to combine work and school, using a work-study placement. The decisions and strategies he creates are affected by the five core skills described above.

Our work has used these five core skills, and the concepts of decisions and strategies, as a conceptual framework for helping schools develop a range of programs for adolescents (see Table 1). The next sections of this paper describe some examples of school programs which use a decision-making approach.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS USING A DECISION-MAKING APPROACH

Classroom Curriculum

A decision-making approach can be the formal focus for specific classroom curriculum, or it can be integrated into traditional academic courses. The five curriculum units developed by the Adolescent Issue Project are examples of the first approach (Brion-Meisels, Lowenheim, & Rendeiro, 1982. Our curriculum focuses on decisions and strategies, and provides daily practice in making decisions; it emphasizes case studies, role-plays, discussion, and group problem-solving tasks which develop the five core skills described above. From this perspective, factual information is integrated into the decision-making process rather than being teught in isolation from the interpersonal context. For example, information about the consequences of drug abuse is applied to the task of making personal decisions about drug use, or in helping to counsel a friend with a drug problem. The same is true of information about work, law, sexuality, and government.

A second curriculum strategy is to integrate the decision-making process into traditional academic curriculum. For example, we have helped teachers adapt vocational curricula so that they include tasks which require the five core social skills. These adaptations can be made for individualized curricula as well as for group lessons. Social studies and reading curricula also lend themselves well to the integration of activities which ask students to make decisions; for example, by taking the role of a character in a play, or of a person in an historical situation, or by discussing literature in the light of decisions. The social studies materials created by Fenton and colleagues (Fenton, 1976) and the *Facing History and Ourselves* curriculum (Strom & Parsons, 1982) are excellent examples of this approach, and can be adapted for use with a wide range of students.

Counseling and Discipline

Our work has suggested ways in which the five core skills can be used to help adolescents make decisions about difficult personal and interpersonal situations. For example, a counselor might use the core skills to structure an intervention to help students deal with a fight. In this case, the goal of the session would be to help both students see the problem from the other's perspective, generate alternative solutions to the problem, listen to each other, clarify each individual's behavior and its consequences, and agree upon a mutually acceptable solution. The same process might be used to encourage a student to accept responsibility for helping to create his own discipline consequences. The five core skills can provide a common focus for

adult and student in both counseling and crisis situations, so that together they can create a plan to resolve the conflict.

The core skills also play an important preventive role. They provide a common vocabulary so that when problems arise, both student and adult have a repertoire of strategies which they share and have practiced together.

In each case, the five core skills help create a process which shifts responsibility and credit for behavioral problems and progress fro the adult to a more shared and interdependent adult-student responsibility. Students begin to take more positive, legitimate control over their own behavior; they both become and feel more competent to make decisions, and they have legitimate ways to exercise power. Adults being to feel less alone in their responsibility; they are free to focus more energy on helping rather than simply controlling students.

A decision-making approach can be integrated into a range of discipline systems which include an awareness of personal responsibility including behavioral contracts (Meisels, 1974), life-space models (Redl & Wineman, 1952), humanistic approaches (Jones, 1980; Wolfgang & Glickman, 1980), and reality-therapy programs (Glasser, 1965).

Student Governance

Classroom Meetings. In schools with a homeroom, a cluster, or self-contained classroom model, the classroom unit can be an effective group in which to make decisions. Classroom meeting activities have been used to help students evaluate their own behavior with a focus on: (a) strengths, needs, and progress; (b) planning and carrying out classroom activities; (c) discussion and decisions about classroom elective units; (d) resolution of group problems related to behavior or sharing classroom materials; and (e) discussion of issues which have come up in the course of a school day. The meetings provide a regular, predictable, and safe context for making decisions which affect student life, as well as a way to help students evaluate their own progress (Brion-Meisels, 1979).

Student Government. In schools which already have a student council (or similar representative body) the core skills can be used to focus meetings, to concretize plans, generate solutions, and evaluate the work of the student council. The five core skills facilitate group interaction and thus can help extend the social skills of members, for example, by facilitatng student leadership of student council meetings. In schools with a cluster system all students can meet in a community meeting to deal with common issues and make plans for the school or their group. In either case, the core skills can help shift responsibility from adults to students by providing a common vocabulary and set of expectations, as well as by offering students opportunities to practice making decisions which actually affect the quality of their school lives. In addition, an agreed-upon core set of social skills can help adults feel more comfortable in actually sharing responsibility and power with students.

Parent Involvement

Parents and schools can collaborate and become more effective by focusing on the common-ground decisions which adolescents face at home an in school. For example, both parents and educators must help adolescents deal with authority, respond to limits, negotiate new rights and responsibilities, get along with peers, share property and space, and work in groups to solve

common problems. Monthly parent education meetings have been implemented with a focus on understanding the universal tasks of adolescence as a vehicle for generating solutions to common problems; e.g., discipline, drug use, sexual relations, personal hygiene. Using a common focus and vocabulary, parents of students who are in special and regular educational settings can come together to share common problems, collaborate on solutions, and work together to improve educational programs. The discovery of common ground among parents can facilitate the mainstreaming of special needs youth, because parents can help to break down stereotypes involved with special needs labels, and emphasize instead the common tasks of all adolescents and their parents.

Student Assessment

One of the most important tasks in successfully integrating special needs youth into regular school settings is a careful assessment of basic social skills. The framework of decisions, strategies, and the five core skills facilitates student assessment. Several assessment methods can be used. For example, short vignettes and case studies can be used in individual interviews and small group sessions to elicit important information about students' social skills. Case studies of "typical" adolescent dilemmas involving parents, teachers, friends, and employers can be presented to students. Responses can be analyzed to gather relevant social assessment data; for example:

- Does the student define interpersonal problems in individual or relational terms?
- How many different alternative solutions can the student generate?
- Are consequences of personal decisions anticipated accurately? Do they include consequences for others as well as the self?
- Are a student's strategies generally physical? Verbal? Do they seek mutual solutions?
- How well does the student evaluate his/her own social skills?

In turn, this information can be used to structure interventions aimed at improving social skills.

Members of the Adolescent Issues Project have developed measures and methods which use short case studies to analyze both the number and developmental sophistication of students' social skills (Selman, Krupa, & Demorest, 1982). Table 2 provides examples of case studies.

We have used these case studies in both individual and classroom sessions, and they have provided a useful guide for planning interventions. For example, many of the students who have participated in the program have been struggling to develop strategies which are reciprocal; that is, which take into account the needs of the other person involved in the situation. This assessment has led us to create case studies and activities which emphasize a second-person perspective on a problem. Responses from participants in staff development sessions has corroborated the usefulness of this kind of assessment procedure for helping them understand and improve their own interventions.

The same analysis can be helpful in evaluating intervention outcomes. For example, it is possible to analyze pre- and post-program interviews with students in terms of the number of alternative solutions they can generate, as well as in terms of the mutuality of the strategies they suggest for solving interpersonal dilemmas. This kind of information is an important adjunct to traditional achievement and behavioral measures of student progress. In addition, an evaluation which focuses on core social skills provides a com-

TABLE 2

Sample Case Studies to Elicit
Decision-Making Skills and Negotiation Strategies

1. Susan works in a grocery store after school. She is only supposed to work for 10 hours each week, but her boss keeps asking her at the last minute to work late on Friday nights. Even though the boss pays her for the extra time, she doesn't like being asked to work late at the last minute.
   a. What would be a way for Susan to deal with her boss?
   b. Why do you think that is a good strategy?
   c. What might happen if Susan tried that strategy?
   d. Can you think of any other ways to deal with this situation?
2. Dan and his girlfriend are out on a date. Dan wants to start going out with other girls, but he's not sure his girlfriend will like that.

   (ask same questions as in Number 1)
3. Mark is a runner on the school track team. An important meet is coming up that the coach really wants to win. He asks Mark to take some drugs that will give him a better chance of winning. Mark doesn't want to take the drugs.

   (ask the same questions as above)
4. Amy's uncle drinks every day. She hates that and would like to get him to stop.

   (ask the same questions as above)
5. Bob works on a construction job with his friend Alex. Alex gets stuck with a job that is really hard, and he wants Bob to help him. Bob doesn't want to help with the job.

   (ask the same questions as above)

Adapted from Krupa, 1982.

mon vocabulary for staff and parents when they begin to discuss reintegration of special needs students.

Summary of School-Based Programs

The examples presented above are suggestive but not exhaustive of the programmatic applications of a decision-making model. In some cases, the decision-making framework can be used to supplement, formalize, or systematize existing interventions. In other cases this approach provides a new focus for schools which work with young adolescents. The program has been used in both ways by a range of special needs schools during the past three years. The next section provides evaluation data from the second-year replication of the program.

EVALUATION

Replication Sites & Evaluation Measures

During the second year of our federal funding, the program was replicated at two different levels in a number of schools. Twelve special education programs field tested components of the curriculum; staff who taught the materials completed lesson evaluations and participated in several written and oral evaluation activities. The drug use and work curriculum were field tested by regular education classrooms. In addition, four special education sites replicated other components of the program; they worked with Project consultants to develop decision-making programs in student counseling, discipline, student government, and parent education. Therefore a total of seventeen schools were involved in second-year evaluation activities. Evaluation measures included the following:

- Pre- and post-program achievement tests on curriculum content;
- Pre- and post-program interviews with a sample of students to measure changes in the strategies used to resolve hypothetical case studies;
- Written and interview evaluations with school staff;
- Follow-up interviews with six students who completed the program during the first year of the Project;
- Interviews with parents at one replication site.

Evaluation Results

Since the primary goal of the Project has been to help schools develop decision-making programs to fit their own structure and needs, the replication evaluation was not standardized as to the exact implementation of the program. In other words, Project staff did not dictate the exact number, sequence, or length of the curriculum units used by any school; these decisions were left to the staff. Rather, the goals of evaluation were to describe program implementation at different sites, to seek areas for improvement of implementation, and to record relevant changes in students' skills, attitudes, and/or behavior (Krupa, 1982).

Information Gains

Small positive gains were reported at all sites that collected pre- and post-program curriculum achievement tests. Teachers who used the curriculum reported that test scores were probably affected by general deficits in test-taking skills. Student participants reported that they learned new information, especially about drugs and sexuality, and that they could use this information to help others. For example, one student said: "Kids should know this stuff. They listen to me now when I talk about drugs" (Brion-Meisels, 1983).

Behavior and Attitudinal Changes

Students who participated in the program reported that they felt differently about themselves, and changed some of their social behaviors:

"I wouldn't have a job now without it."

"The more I learned about drugs, the more I stayed away from them."

"It helped me deal with different people. The jobs part helped me keep a job."

"It taught you that you are not a failure."

"It's good to have this because people should know about drugs so they can make good decisions" (Krupa, 1982, pp. 66-68).

Self Evaluation

Staff at the four sites which replicated several components of the program were interviewed extensively about the impact of the program on their own teaching and on the school climate generally. They consistently reported that the approach had helped them deal with difficult classroom issues even when the materials sometimes came in conflict with their own values. For example, one teacher told the evaluator, "The program improved my ability to verbalize and be creative with students around issues addressed by the Project" (Krupa, 1982, p. 31). A second teacher reported that the introduction of a parent group led to new teacher sensitivity to the needs and strengths of parents. An administrator wrote in her evaluation:

> Our students developed the capacity to participate in class discussions, learn through hypothetical situations and role-playing, apply structured steps of decision making, and verbalize value judgments.... In addition, our staff gained confidence and expertise in dealing with the difficult topics addressed by the program. The course has become a part of our educational program (Krupa, 1982, p. 36).

The evaluation interviews indicate a clear and uniform policy decision on the part of participating schools to include a decision-making approach to adolescent issues as a core component of their program in the future.

Parent Evaluation

Parents who participated in a year-long education group in one of the replication sites evaluated the program both individually and in a group session. They too were uniformly positive about the need for and effectiveness of a decision-making approach. Two responses suggest the focus for their evaluation:

> My daughter is almost more knowledgeable about some things than I am. She has accurate clinical knowledge.... I learned in the necessity of knowing, but she's learning in school.

> I know that my son feels very good about me coming (to the Parents' Group), that I am a part and that I'm interested in coming to school. Before he was a little scared at first; he didn't know what I was going to do with the information. But whenever I had to cancel, he would always say, 'What do you mean, you're not going? Why Mom? What's your reason?' (Linowitz, 1981)

Summary

Researchers and educators who have been involved in the assessment and evaluation of social skills are aware of the many limitations and caveats of the kind of evaluation data reported here. At this point it is difficult to separate out the individual program variables which produce positive changes in attitude and behavior. However, it is clear that the participants in the program verbalized a felt change in their own approach to the issues and that they found a decision-making framework to be effective and adaptable in their own school settings. Further evaluation and research is necessary in order to isolate specific program components which contribute to these changes, to measure the stability of reported changes, and to refine the implementation process so

that it meets the needs of specific schools and communities.

At this point the results of our evaluation efforts strongly suggest the potential effectiveness of a decision-making approach in addressing some major concerns of schools serving young adolescents (Krupa, 1982). The next section of the article offers some guidelines for educators who are interested in implementing this kind of program.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Our work with a range of public, private, and collaborative schools suggests that several variables may affect the success of program implementation.

1. *Someone must be willing to begin the process.* Although the principles of decision making are fairly simple and straight-forward, implementing the program can be time-consuming work. The most difficult part of the process is getting started, taking the risks associated with a "new" program, learning new skills, asking new questions, and sharing decisions with students.

2. *Administrative support and leadership is crucial.* The new skills and activities associated with a decision-making approach (whether in the classroom, crisis management, or parent education) are, like any new skills, bound to create some discomfort and mistakes. Administrative staff need to lead by example, make their support clear, and provide opportunities for staff to practice new skills through in-service, team meetings, informal discussion, and modeling.

3. *Staff must carefully assess their own needs and skills, as well as those of their students.* The success of a decision-making approach often rests on the "first steps" which can establish positive decision-making experiences and demonstrate the usefulness and success of the approach. Careful assessment is essential. Staff need to be willing to explore their own concerns, and feel at ease asking for help from peers and/or supervisors. Staff also need to know where students are comfortable and competent in making decisions. Not all students can participate in representative student council, but all students *can* make *some* decisions (whether large or small) about their school life.

4. *Students need to be involved in the process.* Student involvement is especially crucial with adolescents. All students can and should be involved in identifying their own needs and interests, making decisions about classroom rules and consequences, offering constructive suggestions for classroom lessons and activities, etc. One crucial task for school staff is to identify the range of potential decision-making opportunities for students, and then involve them as early as possible in the first available opportunity for making decisions. Again, this involvement will be different for individual students and groups of students depending on developmental skills, and their special needs and strengths. However, the opportunity to practice decisions must be available to all.

5. *Parents must be informed and involved.* Parents can be powerful allies in a whole-school approach to decision making. Parents of special needs children are often painfully aware of their children's difficulties in making successful personal decisions. They have insights and experience which can be used by school staff; and they have the "other" 18 hours of the day in which to provide opportunities for practicing social skills. Our work strongly suggests that a positive parent-school alliance is a crucial factor in supporting the adolescent's attempts to learn how to make better decisions. We suspect this principle holds for all students and may be an even more powerful variable in

the lives of young children. Furthermore, decision-making skills are relevant to parents and teachable *by* parents.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to outline an approach to decision making as a core component of school practice; e.g., a social skill which is seen as relevant and accessible to all students regardless of their special needs or skills. The program described is intended to address common developmental tasks of adolescents which involve transitions in their relationships with parents, teachers, employers, friends, and peers. The specific issues addressed are common to all adolescents; the skills, interests, and awareness which an adolescent brings to these issues may vary greatly depending on his/her intellectual and social development. However, the framework of core social skills, decisions, and strategies can facilitate finding a common ground. The core skills also can provide a common ground among a range of different school philosophies, teaching styles, and discipline systems, because the core skills can be addressed in a range of specific school activities (classroom, student government, counseling, or parent education).

The program has been successful in helping adolescents with special educational needs improve their social skills. Furthermore, it has provided a common focus for staff and parents who share a number of concerns about the difficult transitions of adolescence. Our work suggests that this kind of approach, modified to fit the specific orientations and needs of individual students and schools, can facilitate mainstreaming of special needs adolescents and at the same time improve the climate of the school community for all of its members.

REFERENCES

Brion-Meisels, S. (1979). Reasoning with troubled children. *Moral Education Forum*, Winter.

Brion-Meisels, S. (1983). *Student evaluations of a course on decisions about drug use.* Unpublished manuscript (Available from The Adolescent Issues Project, Judge Baker Guidance Center, 295 Longwood Avenue, Boston, MA 02115).

Brion-Meisels, S., Lowenheim, G., & Rendeiro, E. (1982). *The adolescent decisions curriculum.* Unpublished manuscript (Available from the Adolescent Issues Project, address above).

Brion-Meisels, S., & Selman, R. (1982, August). *The adolescent as negotiator: The development of a social self.* Paper presented at the First Annual International Conference on Moral Education, Fribourg, Switzerland.

Cooper, L. (1983). Middle schools: Developing an identity (Part Two). *The Principals' Center Newsletter, 2*(2), 8-10.

Feeney, S. (1980). *Schools for young adolescents: Adapting early childhood model.* Carrboro, NC: Center for Early Adolescence.

Fenton, E. (1976). *Civic education: Social studies (Unit I).* Pittsburgh: Education Center, Carnegie-Mellon University.

First, J. M., & Mizell, M. H. (Eds.). (1980). *Everybody's business: A book about school discipline.* Columbia, SC: Southeastern Public Education Program.

Fox, R. (1973). *School climate improvement: A challenge to the school administrator.* Denver, CO: CFK Ltd. (Available from Phi Delta Kappa).

Glasser, W. (1965). *Reality therapy.* New York: Harper & Row.

Jones, V. (1980). *Adolescents with behavior problems: Strategies for teaching, counseling, and parent involvement.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Krupa, M. (1982). *Evaluation report.* Unpublished manuscript (Available from The Adolescent Issues Project, address above).

Linowitz, J. (1981). *Report on the parent component of the adolescent issues project.* Unpublished manuscript (Available from The Adolescent Issues Project, address above).

Meisels, L. (1974). The student's social contract: Learning social competence in the classroom. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 7,* 34-35.

Redl, F., & Wineman, D. (1952). *Controls from within.* New York: Free Press.

Rosenthal, R. (1966). *Experimenter effects in behavioral research.* New York: Appleton Century Crofts.

Selman, R. (1980). *The growth of interpersonal understanding.* New York: Academic Press.

Selman, R., Krupa, M., & Demorest, A. (1982). *Interpersonal negotiation strategies manual.* Unpublished manuscript (Available from The Adolescent Issues Project, address above).

Spivack, G., Platt, J., & Shure, M. (1976). *The problem-solving approach to adjustment.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Strom, M., & Parsons, W. (1982). *Facing history and ourselves.* Watertown, MA: Intentional Educators.

Wolfgang, C., & Glickman, C., (1980). *Solving discipline problems.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Steven Brion-Meisels, The Adolescent Issues Project, Judge Baker Guidance Center, 295 Longwood Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Elisabeth Rendeiro, The Adolescent Issues Project, Judge Baker Guidance Center, 295 Longwood Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Gwen Lowenheim, The Adolescent Issues Project, Judge Baker Guidance Center, 295 Longwood Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115